

23 June 2014

**Update: Empty Homes Scrutiny
Review**

**Joint Report of Lorraine O'Donnell, Assistant Chief Executive and
Ian Thompson, Corporate Director, Regeneration and Economic
Development**

Purpose of the Report

- 1 This report provides with an update on the progress made in relation to the recommendations contained within the 'Empty Homes' Scrutiny review report published in March 2013.

Background

- 2 The Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee commenced the 'Empty Homes' Scrutiny Review in February , 2012 as a result of members identifying within the quarterly performance reports, as an area of below target performance, the number of empty properties brought back into use as a result of local authority intervention.
- 3 In addition, it was considered timely that such a review be undertaken in light of the difficulties faced by people in getting onto the property ladder, the financial implications to the local economy of having houses standing empty and the potential impact of the Government's Welfare Reform programme.
- 4 The 'Empty Homes' Scrutiny Review report was considered by Cabinet at the meeting on the 13 March, 2013. At that meeting Cabinet agreed the recommendations contained within the review report which included a recommendation for a six monthly update on progress against recommendations contained in the report. The last update on progress was provided to the committee at the meeting on the 24 September, 2013 and it is therefore considered timely for a further progress update to be given to members at the June meeting of the committee.

Terms of Reference of Review

- 5 During the review evidence was gathered in relation to the following areas:
 - Government Policy on this issue including the potential for penalising poor performing Local Authorities in dealing with Empty Homes.

- To consider DCC Policy specifically in respect of Empty Homes and private Sector Housing renewal aimed at bringing empty homes back into use including the links between the County Durham Plan, the Council's Housing Strategy, settlement based Area Regeneration Masterplans and associated housing policies.
- To examine the number of empty properties within County Durham including:
 - The Council's 8 key regeneration areas;
 - Major Settlements;
 - Tenure – Private Sector Housing Stock.
- To examine the range of options available to DCC to tackle this issue including:
 - Private Sector Housing Renewal schemes;
 - CPO/Clearance Areas;
 - Empty Dwelling management orders/Enforcement Powers;
 - New Homes Bonus.
- To ascertain the progress made by the Council against the above initiatives including recent establishment of the new area based approach to Housing renewals and improvement covering both empty properties and private landlords which came into effect in July 2011.

Recommendations of Review

- 6 The Scrutiny review report made recommendations in respect of:-
- How the Council can address the demands of the Government to tackle Empty Homes including the use of the various funding streams available to the Council;
 - The effectiveness of the Council's Private Sector Housing Strategy in relation to empty homes;
 - The use of the various options available to the Council to tackle empty homes with regard to ensuring value for money;
 - How the Council can learn from other Councils who are seen as exemplar authorities in tackling empty homes and the initiatives that they use to be successful.

Current position

- 7 The attached Action Plan (Appendix 2) provides information on the progress made in relation to the recommendations contained in the Scrutiny review report.

Next steps

- 8 The Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee as part of the systematic review process will receive a further update of progress made in relation to the recommendations contained in the review report at a future meeting of the committee.

Recommendations

- 9 Members of the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to consider and comment upon the progress made in relation to the recommendations contained in the Scrutiny Review report.
- 10 That the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive a further report detailing progress made against the recommendations contained in the Scrutiny Review report at a future meeting.

Background Papers

- Empty Homes Overview and Scrutiny Review report – March 2013.
- Economy and Enterprise OSC – cover report – Review of Empty Homes – 24 September 2013.

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Appendix 1: Implications

Finance – the Review report identifies financial implications associated with the approval of Empty Homes Cluster Bids which have been drawn up for consideration as part of the MTFP3 2013-2017. The report also details the financial implications of the Local Council Tax support scheme and associated proposals relating to the removal of Council Tax discounts for empty properties.

Staffing – The Review report identifies the staffing changes that have been undertaken within the Housing Regeneration and Renewals Team as part of the RED Restructure. It also invites Cabinet to undertake a feasibility study adopting an “Invest to save“ initiative to increase the complement of Empty Homes officers utilising potential New Homes Bonus resources generated through improved Council performance in bringing empty homes back in to use.

Risk – None

Equality and Diversity –An Equality Impact Assessment may be required to be undertaken by service carrying out the implementation of recommendations and the Committee will review this as part of the monitoring of recommendations within its work programme for 2013/14.

Accommodation - None

Crime and Disorder - Bringing empty homes back into use will contribute to the reduction of anti-social behaviour and environmental blight associated with long term empty homes.

Human Rights - None

Consultation – The Working Group engaged with local residents in the priority regeneration areas of Wembley, Easington Colliery, West Chilton and Craghead as part of the site visits undertaken during the course of the Review.

Procurement - None

Disability Discrimination Act – None

Legal Implications – The key legislative tools available to the Council in tackling empty homes are detailed within the Review report.